

How Many People Are Gathered Here? Group Work and Family Constellation Theory

Transactional Analysis Journal
2013, Vol. 43(4) 352-365
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DOI: 10.1177/0362153713519743
ta.sagepub.com

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Abstract

Each of us is both an individual and a carrier of dynamics from many generations of ancestors. Many people hold trauma that belonged originally to other family members or the family group, and there are few ways to work with such situations clinically. In this article the authors address how the principles and practice of Hellinger's (1998) family constellation work provide tools with which to heal the family system and thus the client. They describe the impact of the family group on the individual psyche and the practical application of family constellation work in group settings. They also explore the interface between family constellation work and transactional analysis, including how transactional analysis theory supports the use of family constellations.

Keywords

family system, family constellation, Parent ego state, intergenerational trauma, hot potato, impasses, intergenerational scripts

The most difficult disorders to understand are those for which we can find no appropriate event or circumstances in the person's life to account for the severity of the condition that is suffered, where there is no obvious event to relate the condition to, or the symptoms displayed and the severity of the condition are out of all proportion to any possible associated events. (Ruppert, 2008, p. 3)

This quote perfectly describes a conundrum with which all psychotherapists are familiar. As clinicians ourselves, we have puzzled over clients who have congruently worked through many issues in therapy and yet showed little benefit. Others occasionally have shocked us by becoming suicidal when they appeared committed to their safety, their sanity, and the well-being of others. Other clients formed with us a therapeutic alliance that waxed and waned as if there was constant interference in the connection. We have tended to expect that few difficulties will resist the resources of the therapy group, but the kinds of clients just mentioned have proven as resistant in group as in individual

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work. These clients were usually motivated and as puzzled by their difficulties as we were. Gradually, we discovered that these issues often had their roots in unhelpful family legacies, and our focus, therefore, needed to be on the generation that passed on the legacy. Our work had been ineffective largely because we were working with the wrong person.

Our quest led us to systemic approaches, in particular, to family constellation work (Hellinger, 1998). These approaches treat the family in its entirety as a group, or system, and the individual as part of that system. All generations, past and present, are viewed as having their part to play in maintaining a healthy family. The systemic therapist takes into account the impact of previous generations, whose energy is incorporated into the Parent ego state (Berne, 1964) of each group member. In family constellation work, we have found an effective method of group work to treat difficulties emanating from the family system.

The term *family constellation* derives from astronomy, wherein a group of stars referred to as a constellation has its own order and can be identified at a glance. In a family constellation, the shape and nature of relationships in the family emerge with clarity and are available for change. A family constellation involves setting up a partial live genogram for the client, with real people from the therapy group or workshop representing those family members who are relevant to the issue at hand. As representatives allow themselves to be a conduit for the people they represent, the unconscious patterns within the system (or constellation) emerge.

Origins of the Systemic Approach

In an article about the influence of previous generations, it seems appropriate to honor those professional ancestors whose work influences us as clinicians. A systemic approach to understanding individual difficulties emerged in the 1950s at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California, with research into the origins of schizophrenia (Bateson, Jackson, Hayley, & Weakland, 1956). From this work emerged the concept of the *double bind*, which explained how apparently crazy behavior can be seen as an understandable response to the person's family system. Virginia Satir (1983), who was also at the MRI, devised training for working with the family system, including systemic constellations (which she referred to as *family reconstructions*).

Boszormenyi-Nagy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) researched the dynamics of thousands of families and developed a complex theoretical base for his work with family systems, which he called *contextual family therapy*. Key to his theory was the idea of loyalty within the family system:

Loyalty in our sense is a preferential commitment to a relationship, based on indebtedness born of earned merit. Parents beget offspring and become obligated to their survival and nurturance. Parents also earn their child's commitment in return for mother's and father's unique, unrepayable contribution. (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 15)

What children receive from their parents, they pass to their children, thus keeping a balance of give and take. When these invisible loyalties work effectively, there is a sense of justice. When justice is not in place, there is disturbance in the family and a need to redress the balance. Without this, problems may be passed from generation to generation.

Schützenberger (1998) found, in the history of many of her clients, patterns that seemed to reflect a repetition of ancestors' experiences, often going back several generations. These included life-threatening accidents coinciding with the dates of traumatic historical events. These events were often unknown to the clients until they researched their family genealogy. Schützenberger identified "the anniversary syndrome" (p. 95), which refers to the way dates of previous tragedies may present a risk for a client in the here and now. We are familiar with the fear people experience when they reach the age at which one of their parents died. The systemic therapist does not see this as mere

superstition but as related to the dynamics of family loyalty that may lead a later family member to repeat the death of the ancestor at the same age.

Jacob Moreno, born in 1889, began his exploration of the connection between the group and the individual ahead of other systemic therapists. He suggested “that the health of the person is proportional to his or her relationship with the group” (Carnabucci & Anderson, 2012, p. 35). Psychodrama uses the resources and creativity of a group to create a new experience for the client of his or her place within that group. Some key differences between family constellation work and psychodrama include:

- Psychodrama is a drama about the client’s known reality and relationships; constellation work allows another, previously unconscious reality to emerge and be addressed.
- The location of the drama in psychodrama is in the client’s lifetime; the location of the drama in constellation work is in the client’s ancestry.
- The client in a psychodrama coaches another group member in how a member of the client’s family or group would behave, stand, or speak; in constellation work, the representative becomes a conduit for the qualities of the person he or she represents, without coaching.
- Psychodrama supports the client in saying what has been unsaid; healing for a client in constellation work means she or he is healed in the context of healing the family.

Hellinger and the Development of Family Constellation Work

Bert Hellinger was deeply influenced by his Catholic faith and by the way his family lived it. He trained in a Catholic religious order where he was ordained as a priest. The order sent him to work as a missionary in South Africa. He spent 16 years there working with the Zulu people. He was impressed by the respect given to elders by subsequent generations and especially by the way the Zulu people saw their ancestors as an energetic, available resource for the present generation.

Hellinger trained in group dynamics during his time as a priest and subsequently left the priesthood after 25 years. He returned to Germany in 1969 and trained as a psychoanalyst. His analyst gave him a copy of *The Primal Scream* (Janov, 1970), and he was sufficiently impressed to undertake nine months of training with Janov in the United States. Body-based psychotherapy remained an integral part of his work and became an essential aspect of family constellation work.

Hellinger continued to explore many other approaches, including family therapy, transactional analysis, gestalt, and hypnotherapy. He integrated aspects of theory and practice from all of these approaches into his work. He was introduced to transactional analysis through Fanita English. He was particularly interested in scripts and how some seemed to function across generations. He was first introduced to family constellations when training in family therapy with Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis and decided that he wanted to work systemically. The combination of these many influences led him to develop his own method of working, which he called *family constellations*. In his workshops he wove together teaching and practice. It was mainly left to others to ensure that his ideas were committed to print.

Hellinger’s Principles of the Orders of Love and Their Application

The aim of every constellation is to reinstate what Hellinger called the *orders of love* (Broughton, 2010, pp 41-46; Hellinger, 1998, pp. 1-190) within a family. The orders of love can be summarized as follows:

- Love flows from the ancestors, ancient and recent, to their descendants.
- As the givers of life and love, ancestors are entitled to respect from their descendants and take precedence over them.

- Everyone has his or her place in the family; the dead are as much a part of the family constellation as the living.
- Each generation has responsibility for dealing with its fate.

Precedence

Those who come first into the system have authority over those who come later. This means that parents have precedence over children, who in turn have precedence in their birth order. First wives or husbands have precedence over second wives or husbands. However, when the first partner remarries, she or he then belongs in the new system she or he has joined. Establishing rightful precedence can be enough for resolution of a constellation.

Everyone Has His or Her Place

Hellinger maintains that every family member has his or her place in the family system, including those who have died. When such members are not acknowledged or spoken of, there will be disturbances in the family. The missing may be family members who died prematurely or were aborted or were stillborn. The missing person may have been seen as a source of shame because of illegitimacy or mental illness. Consequently, when contracting with a client before a constellation is done, we are interested in whether he or she is aware of any such individuals in his or her family. A history of early death in recent family members may indicate a tragic past death that is being reenacted. In order for the system to find harmony and order, each person must be accounted for in his or her place, and when a missing person is brought in, representatives report that they are calmed.

Disturbances of Precedence and Responsibility

When a younger family member takes on the fate of older members, the family energy is disrupted. The resolution comes when the owner of the trauma or difficulty takes responsibility for managing his or her problem, as if to say, "Leave it with me, it is my suffering, not yours."

From a transactional analysis perspective, we can see the roles on the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968) adopted by those involved in such intergenerational dramas. The ancestor is a Victim because she or he was traumatized. However, she or he then unintentionally becomes a Persecutor of the descendants by leaving the unresolved trauma in the family system. This is what English (1969) identified as the *episcrypt* or *hot potato*. The descendant attempts to Rescue the ancestor by unwittingly picking up the hot potato, thereby becoming a Victim.

More subtly, Hellinger (1998) would say that the descendant is also persecuting the ancestor by disrespecting the latter's capacity to take responsibility for his or her trauma. The reinstatement of precedence and responsibility has two stages: The first is to support the ancestor in apologizing to the descendant who has carried a hot potato, and the second is to support the descendant in accepting the apology.

The work offers a group setting in which constellators help clients retrieve aspects of the whole setting of their situations that have been lost to view, bringing the living and the dead into mutually satisfactory and respectful order in the service of the living. (Hemming, 2012, p. 4)

We reflect later on some of the interesting challenges faced by us as modern Western liberated women (and humanistic therapists) as we apply these principles and follow Hellinger's method.

Setting Up a Family Constellation

The client describes the issue that she or he wishes to resolve, and a contract is agreed on. The therapist elicits some facts, such as number of siblings, birth order, and whether the parents are alive or dead. The therapist also asks about missing people in the family, including those with whom contact has been lost or who died early. The contracting is brief and little detail of the family's history is sought; in fact, it is often discouraged so that the known narrative does not get in the way of the constellation process.

Agreement is reached as to which family members are relevant to the issue at hand, and the client asks group members to represent those people, starting with the older generation. She or he is then asked to place his or her hands on the shoulders of each representative and to place each person intuitively in relation to the others in the constellation, again starting with older family members. The sex of the representatives is irrelevant: Men are able to represent women and vice versa.

The representatives take time to focus on their experience, and then they speak or move as they feel led. They are discouraged from too much thinking and to trust their bodies. It usually becomes clear quite quickly where the family is disordered. There may be children behaving riotously, a member leaning heavily on another member, and/or gaps where there turns out to be a missing person. Representatives may report feeling pain or icy cold. They may be looking down, often a sign that someone died but is not represented. The therapist takes a position of neutrality, working with what emerges and letting go of previous ideas. Sources of strength and love become apparent as well as areas of disturbance. The aim is to restore the orders of love where possible, according to the principles described earlier here. Often the family members (through the representatives) will suggest what needs to happen.

Relationships tend to be oriented toward hidden orders. They can be revealed by careful examination and by gently placing the participants in these orders into positions in space. Using this method gives rise to new possibilities for understanding the backgrounds of conflicts and for solutions that provide relief for everyone involved in them. (B. Hellinger as cited in Franke, 2003, p. 13)

At the end of a constellation, the client thanks each representative, acknowledging him or her by name. The participants then sit together and visualize the new constellation that has been established. Various techniques are then used to help participants connect with their own energy through body awareness.

An Example of a Constellation

Grace is busy and sociable but still feels lonely and incomplete. "I feel unhappy without my brother, Keith; he stopped contact years ago, and no one talks about him now. My younger sister died last year, and I realized how important Keith is to me." The therapist establishes that Grace is the oldest of four siblings. Her sister June is still alive; her brother Keith is next in age, followed by Bethany, the sister who died.

Grace chooses representatives for her father, her birth mother (who died when Grace was 13), her stepmother, herself, and her three siblings. She places the representatives in order of birth. (Hereafter we will refer to the representatives as the family members they represent.) Immediately, the siblings display agitation. The brother faces outward and says he wants to run. The two younger sisters look sad and cling together. Grace says she feels torn between Keith and their mother, who says she is "not really here, out of contact with everyone." A representative for grandmother is brought in to support mother and proves distant and uninterested in her daughter. Father looks helpless. Everyone seems underresourced, with the exception of the stepmother, who looks tenderly toward the children and at times with concern toward mother. In contrast to other family members, the stepmother

appears totally serene. She reports feeling she wants to help. The therapist asks if she is willing to support mother. She does so willingly, and the mother representative leans against her with a relieved sigh. Father relaxes, and Grace turns her attention to her brother.

An outcome of the constellation is that the brother still resists taking his rightful place as the third born in the sibling line, but he is willing to “come into it as long as I can go when I want.”

The focus of the constellation emerges as reinstating the order of love between father, mother, stepmother, and children. Stepmother willingly honors mother as the mother of the children and the first wife. Mother thanks stepmother for caring for her children and asks stepmother to continue doing so. She tells her children one by one that they will always be in her heart, but she cannot stay and wishes them to love and honor their stepmother. The deep respect and affection between the two women astounds those who know Grace’s story as it had been previously told. Finally, father asks mother’s permission to be with the new wife and affirms that he will never forget her. Mother gives willing permission for stepmother to take her husband and says a loving farewell of them both. The therapist suggests that Grace take her own place, and her representative withdraws. Mother takes a loving farewell of Grace, asking her to accept the stepmother as her mother. This is a brief description of the way love moves within the family, and there are many tears.

The constellation ends with the children in birth order, honoring their father and stepmother with love and gratitude. The issue of the missing brother is only partially resolved, but for the first time the stepmother has her place in the heart of the family and is able to show her love for them.

Grace was subsequently able to recall many examples of her stepmother’s love, shown over a long life. Her stepmother recently died and was buried in the family grave. Prior to the constellation, Grace says she would have felt her stepmother was an intruder. Now she sees it as fitting (and amusing) that her father is sandwiched between his two women, and she sees that her three parents belong together.

This constellation demonstrates how important it is for the therapist in constellation work to let go of any plan and to allow family wisdom to reveal what is needed for healing. Grace’s well-rehearsed story (based on the perception of her Child ego state) was that her stepmother supplanted her mother after waiting eagerly for her to die. She previously described her stepmother’s meanness in rationing food, and the guerrilla warfare she and her siblings engaged in to overcome the rationing. She had held to her original frame of reference, even while describing her stepmother’s generous hospitality in later years. The family energy in the constellation showed a desire to integrate an unexpected source of love. As therapists, we would have seen ourselves as unethical if we had not attended to the will of the family system, which was clearly to ensure that the stepmother took her place. This allowed the love that was blocked by mother’s early death and severe suffering to flow to Grace’s generation. Grace got her wish: to feel complete, though not in the way she expected.

Bringing Transactional Analysis and Family Constellation Work Together

Script Analysis

The most intricate part of script analysis in clinical practice is tracing back the influence of the grandparents (Berne, 1972/1975, p. 323). Following in Berne’s clinical footsteps, other transactional analysis clinicians and writers have acknowledged the importance of the family generational context into which we are all born.

Noriega (2004) researched codependence as a transgenerational script, work for which she won the 2008 Eric Berne Memorial Award. Later, writing of transgenerational scripts, Noriega (2010) described how she uses family constellation work alongside transactional analysis theory and techniques to heal her clients. She thinks the transgenerational script is passed from generation to generation through the Child ego state of the parent.

This process occurs like a family script parade from the archaic Child ego state of mother or father to his or her offspring. In this way, the transmission of script messages may run non-verbally through several generations, going back to grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great grandparents, and forward to children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and beyond. (p. 272)

Noriega identified a number of transactional analysis concepts as the mechanisms by which script messages are transmitted, including ulterior transactions, psychological games, transference psychodynamics, and projective identification. We agree that these mechanisms contribute to the way the script blueprint is passed down through the generations but believe there is still much to be discovered about this transmission process, particularly when a *phantom* (Schützenberger, 1998) of an unknown ancestor from several generations past appears unexpectedly.

Contracting

Barrow (2006) suggested that there is always a third party to a contract. When working systemically, we are aware we are making a *three-cornered contract* (English, 1975). Even when the initial contract appears to be between client and therapist, there are people in previous generations who will be represented and affected by the therapeutic process and who may influence the outcome. We discuss this with the client during the initial contracting process. Where there is clear resistance during constellation work, we find we need to be open with the ancestors and empathic about the reasons for their resistance. “I’m OK, You’re OK” (Berne, 1966), so much at the core of our transactional analysis philosophy, was stressed by both Boszormenyi-Nagy and Hellinger in their own work. This respectful approach is important in establishing a therapeutic alliance and a contract with each member on the family tree. Sometimes this may work out in surprising ways, as in Grace’s constellation, in which the ancestors had a different idea of what was needed to empower the current generation.

Contracting for safety is also important in this work because we do not always know when a family system includes members who have had violent experiences or who have acted violently. We ask participants in a constellations workshop to agree to commit to their safety and that of others no matter what they feel as representatives of the family members. We find participants are able to be both a conduit for the person they are representing and hold their own Adult awareness of this contract. Representatives have described this duality of experience as being partly above the action, able to watch what they are saying and how they are behaving as representatives. If a representative should report wishing to harm another family member, we are then able to say, “Thank you for telling us what you feel, and you know we have an agreement here that no one hurts anyone else.” Similarly, we may say to a traumatized victim, “We will not let anyone harm you.” When the perpetrator takes responsibility for what she or he has done and apologizes to the victim, what the victim is called on to do is to accept the apology. Each needs to find love and humility. At that point, the orders of love are restored.

There are times when a family member declines to have a therapeutic alliance with the therapist and to show compassion and love for his or her family. In such situations, there are other possible resolutions, for example, a perpetrator may leave the family. In one workshop, a grandmother said, “I feel I am responsible for the death of this child, and there is no place for me here.” She stepped out of the constellation of her own volition, leaving the parents to grieve appropriately. In effect, her leaving was an act of love because it allowed some order to be restored and the dead child to take his place. Occasionally, a client may choose to leave his or her family if the family appears to lack compassion or resources. This may be a permanent or temporary solution.

The therapist has an overall contract that she or he will find a way to hold the situation and, when possible, help the family restore the orders of love. This contract is with the group, the individual whose turn it is, and the family whose issues are being made visible. In practice, the therapist must

be prepared for anything, open to what emerges, and able to show confidence in his or her ability to manage what sometimes is traumatic for everyone.

Loyalty, Secrets, and Injunctions

We are used to clients who become confused, which we see as related to a Don't Think injunction (Goulding & Goulding, 1976). Before we integrated family constellation principles into our thinking, we would have been wondering which parent figure transmitted this injunction. Now we consider whether there might be something shameful in the past that encourages the family to forget the existence of a member. The secret may be an early tragic death that was felt to be too onerous to deal with. It may be related to the perceived shame of illegitimacy, mental illness, or criminal activity. The client will not always know the information, but in a constellation the representatives often find they know it.

For example, the representative of a mother will say, "I don't know you" to a child. Someone else in the family will say, "She is the mother," pointing to an aunt or someone who was thought to be a sister. Once the secret is no longer a secret, ways can be found for the orders of love to be reinstated. Although the representatives are within the family energy, somehow they are able to bypass the "don't know and don't tell" family injunction. The representatives have no investment in the old order, and we rarely bring the client into his or her constellation until order is restored.

Hot Potatoes

English (1969) described the *hot potato*, or *episcript*, as something the donor does not want to keep because it is too hot for him or her to handle. He or she passes it to a vulnerable recipient, often a son or daughter. This process is out of conscious awareness for both donor and recipient.

This theory alerts us to traumas in a family system that need addressing to prevent a hamartic script (Steiner, 1974) in the present generation. Because the presence of a hot potato impacts bonding in subsequent generations, it is often disguised by the known issues the recipient has with his or her parents. The hot potato, however, is characterized by its apparent lack of connection to the person's known experience. There may be an intensity in the person's experience that seems out of proportion to the real situation and a sense of tragic drama. Detective work to find the source of the hot potato can be done by tracing the family history or, more quickly, through family constellations. Once the origin of the hot potato is traced, we frequently see that it was unchanged as it passed down the generations. We often find in constellation work that the original owner of the hot potato is still affected by it, even though a descendant believes (out of awareness) that he or she is carrying it for the ancestor.

Once a family carries one hot potato, the system is often weakened and vulnerable to other traumas, so some families carry several hot potatoes. It is not always easy for the systemic therapist to work out where to begin. Although family constellation work can be a brief therapy with major change taking place as the result of one constellation, some families require a number of constellations before change ensues.

A client may experience the impact of a hot potato quite unexpectedly when she or he is particularly vulnerable, as if that vulnerability creates a more fragile boundary between the generations. For example, a long-standing client, Mary, had in individual therapy been working through memories of sexual abuse by a stranger when she was a small child. She had congruently closed her escape hatches (Boyd & Cowles-Boyd, 1980; Holloway, 1973; Stewart, 2007) and was firmly committed to surviving and staying sane. However, she found herself exhausted at the relentless return of memories. At that time of considerable vulnerability, she reported that she had an urgent wish to "get on a train, go to the seaside, and sit on the beach till I die." Both therapist and client knew that

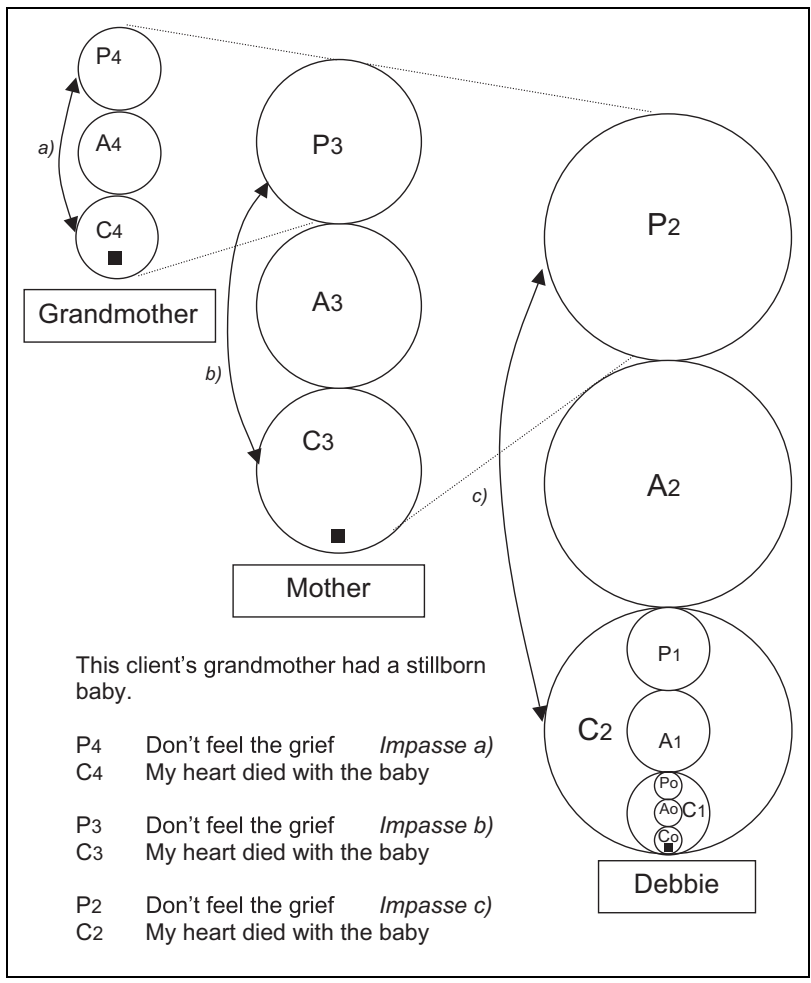


Figure 1. Intergenerational Impasses Caused by Transmission of a Hot Potato.

her wish to give up by killing herself was not congruent with Mary’s courage and determination. This lack of congruence alerted the therapist to a possible hot potato.

A family constellation using soft toys seemed a safe method by which Mary could explore these urges because she could keep herself separate from the part that wished her to kill herself. She spoke to “the one who wants to run away and die.” She told the ancestor that she was sad for her but had to manage her trauma in her own way and hoped the ancestor would understand. She metaphorically handed the urge to end her life back to the ancestor. Later she found out that her great-grandmother had, in fact, gotten on a train and died of hypothermia sitting on a beach.

Using Constellations to Resolve Impasses: Freeing the Stuck Place

We have expanded our way of thinking about impasses (Goulding & Goulding, 1979; Mellor, 1980) in order to consider them in the context of the family system. We have observed these stuck places being revealed and addressed in numerous constellations. Such impasses developed in the family as a result of the original impasse in an ancestor, which defended unresolved trauma. In transactional analysis terms, the descendants are stuck because the traumatized ancestor handed down a hot potato.

We refer to systemic impasses as *intergenerational impasses* to differentiate them from the impasses the client develops as a result of personal experiences. Figure 1 shows how unresolved grief in a grandmother's Child ego state (C_4) is incorporated into mother's Parent ego state (P_3) and subsequently into the client, Debbie's, Parent ego state (P_2).

We realized that the intergenerational impasse must coexist with the impasses therapists work with normally (Mellor, 1980). In practice, we often find that clients have been working at resolving their own impasses, and it is only when they get to a Type III impasse (Mellor, 1980) that it becomes clear there is additional resistance operating, often seen in an intense and unexpected reaction to something. The example of Debbie shown in Figure 1 and described in the next section illustrates this dynamic.

Debbie came to therapy because she wanted to get close to her partner and felt unable to do so. She resolved her Type I and Type II impasses related to commitment and the right to be loved but was still terrified of having children. There was no apparent reason for this fear. Her known history did not seem congruent with the intensity of her feelings nor did the image of a dead baby that she kept seeing in her mind's eye.

On exploring her family history, Debbie discovered her maternal grandmother had given birth to a baby who was stillborn, and it seemed that Debbie was carrying grandmother's unintegrated grief. The therapist suggested that the grandmother needed to talk to her child, fully accept his death, and say good-bye to him. This grandmother did, in a moving Parent interview (McNeel, 1976). Grandmother reclaimed the hot potato, and the dead child took his rightful place in the family. Grandmother was free to feel her love for her surviving children, including Debbie's mother. The mother, in turn, was then free to love Debbie, who was able to contemplate without fear the possibility of having and loving her own children now that she was not carrying her grandmother's unresolved grief.

In sum, the intergenerational impasse has both a different genesis and a different resolution from intrapsychic impasses. The latter are seen as stuck places resulting from conflict between the child's spontaneous impulses and an inhibiting force. This force can be the child himself or herself, attempting to comply with his or her carer, or the discipline of the carer. Because intrapsychic impasses are established during the child's development, they are resolved in reverse order, starting with the most recently established and easiest to access, that is, between the client's Parent (P_2) and the client's Child (C_2). Intergenerational impasses, in contrast, can dissolve, rather like a ladder or run unraveling down a nylon stocking, when the original ancestral impasse is resolved. We no longer talk about the resistant client but ask, "Whose resistance is this?"

We have found a fascinating dilemma in describing these issues theoretically. We know that for Debbie the intergenerational impasse was resolved by direct therapy with her grandmother in a Parent interview. However, we also believe with Noriega (2010) that the intergenerational script, and therefore the hot potato, is somehow passed from Child to Child ego state: grandmother to mother and mother to Debbie. We cannot explain how this happens but believe that it occurs at least in the first year of life and possibly at conception. So, we would tentatively place the hot potato within the very young Child, in C_0 . We think this is the only way to account for the surprising phenomenon that some adopted children are found to carry hot potatoes belonging to their birth family. The exciting reality is that when grandmother took responsibility for her trauma, it was as if she had sucked the hot potato back from the Child ego state of subsequent generations.

Working with Parent Ego States

The Parent interview (McNeel, 1976) has a long history, during which various writers (Dashiell, 1978; Erskine, 2003; Erskine & Trautmann, 2003; Mellor & Andrewartha, 1980) have described working respectfully with the introjected parent so that the client is able to achieve internal harmony. All these authors have described approaching the parent as a real person with real issues that can be resolved. Dashiell (1978) described working with generations other than the immediate parent and

with an archaic trauma that resulted in a hot potato. We see the Parent interview (McQuillin & Welford, 2007) as a resource for every transactional analysis therapist and a means of working safely with archaic traumas all the way back to a great-great-grandparent or even further. We approach the Parent interview with the assumption that we will find the parent's love for the child. As Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner (1986) wrote, "Contextual work utilizes all of the resources at hand, including the effective 'techniques' of all reliable therapeutic modalities. Even more significantly, it is geared toward using all of the available family resources of the family network" (p. 18).

Transactional Analysis Therapy Groups and Constellations

For all of us, our image of what a group will be like, and our place in it, is based on our previous group experiences, particularly those in our family of origin. Berne (1966) called this the *group imago*. He wrote that the purpose of a therapy group was achieved when each member was able to let go of his or her original transference and adjust to the reality of the group and its members.

In a family constellations weekend, participants bring a firmly held picture (*imago*) of their family group. The advantage of working on the family system in a group setting is that the representatives who fill the roles of family members have no investment in the known narrative, that is, the client's family *imago*. The client is outside the energy field of the constellation, sees another reality emerging, and then watches as the orders of love are restored. As this new reality emerges, the client will understand his or her original experiences differently so that the original narrative is also transformed. A participant, taking his place in his own constellation and speaking to his mother, observed, "I understand now why you were as you were."

Sometimes the client cannot accept or believe in the orders of love that emerge. For example, he or she cannot believe that a parent has apologized and expressed love. We may then suggest that the person say to the parent, "I am not yet ready to accept your apology, and I will not pretend." The remaining group members, who have as the client's family representatives experienced the love with intensity and relief, will hold the constellation and its different reality for the client for the duration of the workshop. Feedback shows that movement within client and family may continue after the workshop, although we are unable to explain how.

The process of holding a newly emerged reality is enhanced when the constellation takes place in an ongoing therapy group. A group member who continues to discount a new outcome of his or her constellation will probably be confronted by other group members. A consequence is that we find our groups waste less time on transference and subsequent games. The members become advocates for each others' families and optimistic about what healing is possible for themselves and for each other. They become less dependent on the group leader and take responsibility for deciding how to approach difficulties, including their own and/or those of another group member.

Whatever the group setting, acting as a representative can have a profound personal impact. A client with an intense "Be strong" driver (Kahler, 1974) wept deeply while representing a bereaved parent and thereafter was able to access and express his own emotions, which had been unblocked at the somatic level as a result of the constellation experience. Clients may experience being a perpetrator with everyone afraid of them. Some may discover what it is like to be psychotic or hypomanic. A participant in a recent workshop observed, "I realize now that you cannot reason with a man who is so firmly in his Child ego state." Somehow this experience of another's shadow side seems to broaden our clients' perspectives and helps them own these aspects of themselves.

Challenges in Hellinger's Principles

Hellinger's method was based on traditional ideas about family structures, which as liberated Western women we find astounding. Unfortunately, we have also found that some of the apparently

chauvinistic ideas work! The idea that the older generation has precedence took some time for us to absorb, although we are aware that practitioners from other cultures will be familiar with this principle. We found it particularly difficult when the initial story that emerged was that senior family members had been destructive and self-centered. However, we have found that once the senior ancestors are respected and settled, they can be used as a resource for the family, and the orders of love fall easily into place.

We have also discovered advantages in openly respecting previous generations. We can support clients to own uncomfortable truths about their parents, even when they wish to maintain their parents as perfect. Clients feel less defensive when we speak of the resources in the system being depleted and impacting a parent's ability to give love. With clients who experienced severe neglect as children, and who hold on to their anger when it is no longer fruitful, we wonder if that rage is actually a search for love. The systemic approach also gives us tools to help the parents find the love they did not demonstrate.

Hellinger and ten Hövel (1999) wrote, "In a constellation, when I move the man to the right of the woman, and place him in the first position, he feels responsible, and the woman feels relieved and supported" (p. 149). Although this statement is not congruent for us, in a constellation we often find that both husband and wife say "that feels right" when they stand in that relationship to each other. We have also found puzzling the idea that the perpetrator of a violent crime joins the family of origin of the victim. However, we do see that the impact of a perpetrator is so deep that the family never lets go of him or her, so the perpetrator is in the energy field of the family regardless.

We are both more optimistic and more humble in our approach as a result of using family constellations. The purpose of any constellation is to restore the orders of love for the benefit of the present generation. We do not know what the family will require of us to achieve that goal, but we have learned to trust the healing resources in the family system, even if an ancestor has to be found with those resources from a long way back. This teaches us to see our input as modest. Our optimism is based on seeing ancestors who were historically cold and sometimes abusive to their children find their capacity to love. We find that the most unpromising situations can sometimes be turned around.

We believe strongly that to keep our spiritual integrity and professional competence, we must sustain a stance of "I'm OK, You're OK" toward the (represented) family members. We find this stance relatively easy when a persecutor shows remorse or apology, and the family members show a strong wish to restore the orders of love. It is more challenging when one person appears to be blocking healing for the whole family. We have to accept with humility the right of the family group member to make this choice. It is interesting that as we do so, she or he often seems to soften and the energy begins to change.

In constellation work there are many mysteries we do not fully understand. One is that we rarely remember the constellations. This is surprising because we each remember most details of our clients' therapy. When we let go of a constellation once it is formed, it may be that this allows for further movement. For this reason, we do not encourage participants in a family constellation workshop to go on talking about the constellation but rather support them in allowing it to move on by simply holding and respecting what has happened in that moment in time. Certainly, the effects of a constellation may be immediate, but sometimes it may take longer for them to show in the behaviors of the current generation of family members.

We have learned over the years that this way of seeing our client's difficulties requires mental gymnastics, a deeply curious approach, and a courageous heart on the part of the therapist. We must incorporate into our very soul a deep humility and be prepared not to know much, to be open to the reality shown to us by the family system, and to be its servant. The most important quality in the therapist doing constellation work is openness to what emerges and a firm grasp of the principles underpinning family loyalties spanning generations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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